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ABSTRACT

An examination of family literacy programs was made in this newsletter issue to reveal the trends and practices of these programs and their contribution to the development of children of refugee parents. The examination found that most effective and innovative programs recognize that literacy instruction is more effective when it is content based and begins, as much as possible, within a culturally familiar context; takes into account what the students say they want and need to learn, as well as what the schools say is needed; and recognizes that while home can be a place of stress for language-minority children, it can also be a source of tremendous strength and support. Further discussions focus on how the program Preparing Refugees for Elementary Programs encourages parent involvement, and on observations concerning parental silence about their children's instruction and what it could mean. (GLR)

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Family Literacy: Trends & Practices

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

by Donald A. Ranard

The awareness that parents can contribute to their children's education has led in recent years to the development of family literacy programs, and a growing number of these programs are designed specifically for language-minority families. As a field of study and practice, family literacy is new. The most experienced programs are only a few years old and are therefore experimental in design and approach. But a look at these programs reveals promising trends and practices.

FAMILY literacy programs assume that parents can contribute to their children's language development. They can do so, it is believed, by making reading and writing a meaningful part of family life and by playing an active role in their children's education. The precise connection between parent involvement and school success is not known, however. We don't know exactly what kind of literacy practices at home and what kind of parent participation are most likely to contribute to the literacy development of particular groups of children. "We are navigating uncharted waters," says a director of a family literacy program.

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Educators are confident of one thing: An approach that views the family—both adults and children—as a combined resource for learning is particularly well-suited to the cultural backgrounds and social circumstances of refugee families. In the cultures of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the family, rather than the individual, is the basic unit of society. The strength of family bonds can help or hinder the adjustment process, research shows. On the one

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hand, when youth adapt more quickly than older family members to the new culture, resulting intergenerational tensions can greatly complicate the process of adjusting to school and to the society at large. Alternatively, home can be a source of strength, a place where family members work cooperatively to overcome obstacles. Family literacy programs provide family members an opportunity to explore areas of tension within the family as well as to build on the family as a powerful resource for adaptation.

In most ESL family literacy programs, parents (usually, mothers) receive between 5 and 10 hours a week of ESL instruction. To varying degrees, the content of the classes relates to school and parenting. Programs that can afford it offer childcare services; these programs typically provide an opportunity for parents to interact with their children in ways designed to promote language development.

Beyond these basic features shared by most programs, there is considerable variation among programs in scope, design, and approach.

Design

It is a basic principle of adult education that what is taught should be based on what learners want and need to learn. One way to ensure that this happens is to involve the learners in the design of the program. In ESL family literacy programs, a curriculum is usually field-tested with learners after it has been designed by program staff with input from the schools, but more and more programs are bringing the learners into the process at the beginning.

During its three-year operation, the English Family Literacy Project at the University of Massachusetts/Boston used a model called the "participatory curriculum development process." This model doesn't use a predetermined curriculum; rather, learners and teachers collaboratively identify the issues they later explore. Few ESL family literacy programs are as "learner-participatory" in design as the Boston program, though a Washington state program, with sites in Seattle, Spokane, and Yakima Valley, has taken the notion further than most. In this program, identified by the Harvard Family Research Project as one of the most innovative in the country, teachers begin each 10-week cycle with an assessment and analysis of learners' needs. At the same time, there is a state-developed competency-based curriculum for teachers to "fall back on," notes Suzanne Griffin, who helped design the program.

The Washington program is largely learner-participatory in design, but includes the option of a set curriculum. Most programs reverse the equation: Instruction is based mostly on a set curriculum but also includes opportunities for learners to identify issues they wish to explore.

Scope

Programs designed at least in part by learners tend to cover a wide range of parents' concerns. Other programs focus exclusively on school-related matters. "Everything we do is school-related," said one family literacy program director, who is also the vice-principal of the local elementary school. "They can go other places for other services."

More and more educators, however, recognize an interrelationship between parents' involvement in their children's education and their social and economic circumstances. When language-minority parents don't get involved in their children's education, it is often not just because the concepts and practices are unfamiliar, but also because they have two jobs or they lack transportation or childcare. Programs need to address these issues as much as possible in the classroom as well as through liaison with social service agencies, most educators believe.

Instruction: Providing a context

In a recent report on the intergenerational transfer of cognitive ability, researchers Thomas T. Sticht and Barbara A. McDonald contend that decontextualized education is responsible for many of the problems that adults and children have in learning: "Reading is generally taught as a process, in which the content plays no role; mathematics is usually taught as an abstract subject matter rather than practical knowledge; history is presented as a topic, not as a means to solving social and political problems, and so forth."

It is possible to find examples of family literacy programs in which learners study language as a skill divorced from meaningful content. In these programs, literacy is studied as a decontextual-

ized skill, based on the discredited, but still common belief that "first you learn to read, and then you read to learn." More and more programs, however, use a content-based, whole language approach, reflecting the notion that language is more easily learned when it occurs in whole, meaningful contexts. Students read to learn *while* they master the skills of reading.

Home English Literacy for Parents: An ESL Family Literacy Curriculum, developed by the Northwest Educational Cooperative in Des Plaines, Illinois, is one example of a content-based curriculum. Language is learned within the context of adult survival competencies (e.g., reading basic shopping signs and labels), school-related competencies (e.g., reading a school memo regarding school supplies), and parenting discussion points, (e.g., dealing with the pressure to buy expensive designer clothing for children). Literacy occurs as a natural part of the lesson rather than as a decontextualized classroom exercise.

Programs (or parts of programs) designed collaboratively by staff and learners are also content-based, though the actual content varies from class to class, depending on what the participants decide they want to study.

Parent participation

In a 1986 article on parent involvement, Virginia Collier notes an historic tension "between professional educators' expectations of the role of parents in schools and parents' expectations of what their role should be—between simple parental support of school policies with home reinforcement of school skills, versus parents as advocates and change agents at the decision-making level."

Some family literacy programs—particularly those designed and taught by elementary school teachers—believe that their sole purpose is to support school practice. In these programs, parents learn about the U.S. educational system and philosophy of schooling and are trained in techniques for helping their children with homework. To a large extent, what gets taught is what the schools decide parents need to know.

In other programs, parents are also encouraged to become advocates for their children's education, as concerned individuals or as members of an advocacy group. In a 1989 article on family literacy programs in the *Harvard Educational Review*, Elsa Auerbach cites research showing that parental willingness to advocate for their children contributes to student achievement. The way this apparently works, Auerbach notes from the research, is that parent advocacy "shapes teachers' perceptions, which in turn influence student achievement."

More and more programs use a content-based, whole language approach, reflecting the notion that language is more easily learned when it occurs in whole, meaningful contexts.

Parenting

Most programs include a parenting component. While the content and instructional approach varies, many programs would agree with this description, from Auerbach's article in the *Harvard Educational Review*: "By providing mutual support and a safe forum for dialogue, parents can share and develop their own strategies for dealing with issues such as teenage sex, drugs, discipline, and children's attitudes toward language choice." Even in programs with the most carefully structured curricula, parenting issues are often addressed in open-ended discussions.

Educators stress the need to be culturally sensitive in exploring parenting issues. "Resist the tendency to impose a particular point of view," Suzanne Griffin cautions. "Rather, start with what the parents think is good parenting."

Parent-child interaction

Parent-child interactions are a regular feature of most family literacy programs and are based on the belief that parents can interact with their children in ways that promote language development. What happens during the interaction, however, varies considerably within and between programs.

In some programs, parents are provided training by early childhood specialists in how to interact with their children in ways that encour-

age language development. In other programs, parents talk to, play with, or read to their children without guidance.

The nature of the interaction also varies considerably. The interaction can be a literacy-based activity (reading a story or doing homework), a task that only incidentally involves print (cooking from a recipe or measuring a child's height), or an oral activity (telling a story). There is also variation in the language used (English or native language), the directionality of the interaction (who reads/speaks and who listens), and the particular approach to reading (whole language or skills-based).

One way to build on learners' strengths is to introduce literacy in a culturally familiar and friendly context.

In the most effective programs, the nature of the interaction depends on the language skills that learners bring with them. Parents who lack literacy in any language tell native folk tales to their children. Parents with literacy skills in the native language but not in English can read stories in their own language. And when children have more English literacy skills than their parents (often the case with school-aged, language-minority children) then the children can read to the parents—an approach that research has shown to have a positive effect on children's rate of literacy development. In the Chinle Navajo Parent Child Reading program, for example, children share books with their parents, either by reading or telling stories.

One way to build on learners' strengths is to introduce literacy in a culturally familiar and friendly context. In the Washington state program, for example, Hmong mothers and daughters learn to read by cooking from a recipe or by sewing from pattern. This approach—introducing literacy in a familiar context—is supported by a growing body of research, Steven Reder points out in a recent paper, "Getting the Message Across." It isn't enough to provide context for literacy instruction, Reder argues; also important is the extent to which literacy interactions in the classroom harmonize rather than conflict with patterns of interaction that occur at home and in the community. By way of example, Reder notes a reading program for Hawaiian children in which "the participation structures of the reading lessons were designed to harmonize rather than conflict with those the young children brought to the classroom from their home and community environments."

Some programs have found that family members other than parents can contribute to children's literacy development. In the Chinle project, children write their own books based on Navajo stories told to them by their grandparents as well as parents. A promising finding of a parent involvement project in Arlington, Virginia, was that in parentless households, relatives other than the parents often provided as much support for children's literacy development as did parents in other households. This finding led project director Carmen Simich-Dudgeon to speculate that family literacy projects might be "more productive if the whole family were to be involved."

Conclusion

Because family literacy is a new field, programs vary considerably in scope, design, and instructional approach. The most effective and innovative programs, however, share several features. They recognize that literacy instruction is more effective when it is content based and begins, as much as possible, within a culturally familiar context. They take into account what the students say they want and need to learn, as well as what the schools say is needed. And they recognize that while home can be a place of stress for language-minority children, it can also be a source of tremendous strength and support. ⊠

How PREP Encourages Parent Involvement

THE conventional wisdom among many educators is that Indochinese parents don't want to get involved in their children's education. Not necessarily so, says Lois Purdham, technical program director of PREP (Preparing Refugees for Elementary Programs), a program for elementary-school children at the Philippines Refugee Processing Center. "We've found that many parents are very interested in getting involved," says Purdham. "But it takes personal contact. You have to reach out."

PREP "reaches out" to parents in many ways. First, parent involvement is built into each cycle's 20-week schedule. Each cycle begins with an "open house," an informal get-together for teachers, parents, and children. At this time, an orientation to PREP and to the U.S. elementary school system is given. During the third week, a PTA is formed, if there is sufficient interest, followed by a parent-teacher conference, a few weeks later. Each cycle also includes an evening parent-teacher "social hour," as well as two or three "home visits" by the teacher. Each cycle ends with a graduation, which parents are encouraged to attend.

Throughout each cycle, teachers encourage parents to participate in the classrooms. In Ellen Cajayon's class, for example, parents participate in many ways: they tutor, teach native songs, tell native folkstories, cook native food, make classroom visuals, and decorate the classroom. How parents participate depends on their backgrounds and interests. "I ask them, 'What would you like to do?' " says Cajayon. "So the decision is not always up to me."

PREP also encourages parent participation through homework assignments designed to involve family members. One math assignment, for example, has students seek assistance from parents as they measure their billets with their feet and hands. And in English class, children are told to ask their parents to tell them a folk tale or a story from their own childhood. The children tell these stories in class and then write them down. Eventually, the stories become the bases for books made by the students.

Staff point to several benefits of parent involvement. Parents become familiar with an approach to education that is often very different from what they are used to. For example, in many of PREP's whole language activities, teachers don't overtly correct student errors, which are seen as a natural stage in learning a language. "Parents don't understand why errors aren't corrected," says Lauren Hoyt, technical deputy for instruction. "We spend a certain amount of time explaining the value of not correcting." And parents who become involved in PREP often see for themselves the value of the whole language approach.

PREP's approach to parent involvement also helps "develop a good relationship between the school and the parents," says PREP teacher Luz Bernaldez, who recalls a recent class which included Vietnamese language lessons taught by the parents. "We were learning from each other," she says.

PREP's use of native language and culture in the classroom not only encourages the involvement of parents who otherwise might lack the confidence to participate in the classroom, but it also helps foster a positive parent-child relationship, staff say. And a close parent-child relationship is a key factor in school success, research shows.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of parent involvement at PREP is that it helps demystify a system that often intimidates language-minority parents. PREP supervisor Carolyn Pantangan observes that parents who get involved are more willing to approach teachers. "They come to the classroom and ask how their children are doing," she says. This willingness is evidence that parents are gaining not only an understanding of the U.S. school system but the confidence to play an active role in their children's education. ⊠

From "Parental Involvement: Building in Overseas Initiatives" by J. Patrick Redding. Redding, who was on the staff of the overseas training program in the Philippines from 1982 to 1985, is now coordinator of an ESL social studies program at a high school in Wheaton, Maryland.

MANY of us still persist in thinking that the cultural inheritance of Southeast Asians prohibits them from viewing the teachers of their children with anything less than a high degree of respect or even awe. Outward behavior suggests such respect, but it often masks a healthy dose of skepticism about the capabilities of the individual teacher who might be working with their children.

In a study . . . conducted in Southeast Asia, Lao refugees were asked to rate—on a scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree—the following statement: "A teacher's word should not be corrected."

Twenty-three of thirty-six respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. The reasons generally given were summed up by one 53-year-old ex-soldier, who was illiterate in English:

"[A teacher] is just an ordinary human being like us. What is different about him is that he already finished his studies. But then even if he is a teacher he also commits mistakes because people are not perfect in everything. Even animals with four legs can slip, and . . . surgeons make mistakes. It is not right if we don't correct the teacher [if] what he explains to us is not at all correct and we know it. Since the teacher is not perfect, if we don't correct him, there will be the bad effect not only on us but many other students as well."

The point to be made here is that parental silence or lack of involvement is not necessarily a sign of approval regarding school affairs. The parents of our LEP students are likely to have as many concerns as are found among other parent groups.

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Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement

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